NEWS

Washington-Swanton project increasing units, decreasing commercial space

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The housing project planned for the intersection of Washington and Swanton streets will replace empty store fronts. The project has made some changes, including increasing units while decreasing commercial space. WINCHESTER NEWS FILE PHOTO

Melanson Development Group (MDG) is increasing the number [illegible] a proposed 40B apartment building at the intersection of Washington and

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Swanton streets from 60 to 64 units while shrinking its footprint by 2,300 square feet.

The change will happen by reducing commercial space at the corner of the two streets from 5,656 to 3,800 square feet, increasing the number of small units and reducing residential floor space by 1,400 square feet. The height has also been reduced from 48 feet to 45.

The site, located at 278-292 Washington St. and 12 and 16-20 Swanton St., once housed commercial space, including dry cleaners and a Mexican grill.

The new configuration will have 45 one-bedroom units, up from 37; 12 two-bedroom units, down from 17, and 7 three-bedroom units, up from 6.

There will be 85 parking spaces, with one-bedroom units receiving one space and larger units, two, with commercial spaces available for use by visitors after business hours.

MDG attorney Mark Waugh and a team of experts representing developer Jay Melanson explained these changes and others at the Zoning Board of Appeals meeting held Sept. 25.

Other changes include relocating residential access onto Washington Street in order to increase its visibility and dovetail with travel to and from the building. The lobby will also be redesigned to provide better access to amenities like a resident lounge, gym and mail area.

“It will look different than before,” architect Michelle Quinn Littlefield said, of the new and old designs.

Littlefield showed renderings of the building, which include gab
added the gables are a look in the neighborhood.

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"It's not enough of a detailed rendering to get a feel for what it will look like," ZBA member David Feigenbaum said. "It's a very important site for the town. Washington is a major thoroughfare and it's at a major intersection."

At a ZBA meeting in May, Feigenbaum said he'd like to see more information on facades with sample colors.

"I want to understand the extent it's three dimensional," he said. "This is a critically important building to the town. It will be prominent. We need to pay attention as to how it's constructed, so when we walk down the street we'll be proud."

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What is Chapter 40B?

The project is being constructed under Massachusetts General Law 40B, the so-called "Comprehensive Permit Act" or anti-snob zoning, which eliminates separate permits for developers from various boards in favor of one permit from the Zoning Board of Appeals in order to promote affordable housing.

In exchange for 20-25% affordable housing, a 40B development is able to sidestep zoning ordinances and municipal requirements. Developers are not required to comply with height limitations, required distances from property boundaries, green space and parking space minimums, and other criteria. They are even allowed certain latitudes with building ordinances such as solar and net zero requirements.

According to Mass.gov, Safe Harbor is a term to describe the pro city enjoys when in compliance with the state requirement of afford

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housing. The state has imposed a 10% threshold of affordable housing for communities to avoid 40B.

An incentive to communities is that all units in a 40B, regardless of their affordability, count as affordable units in calculating Safe Harbor thresholds, Vaughn said.

Vaughn doesn't think the changes require any new approval by the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, which promotes affordable housing.

"We don't feel the changes are substantial enough to call that into play," Vaughn said. "Typically it is triggered by an increase of 10% or more."

In May 2023, MDG received an eligibility letter from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, in part due to written remarks submitted by the Select Board reading, "the Board provides its enthusiastic support for the application and looks forward to working with the applicant [and] the ZBA in the ongoing review, permitting and construction of the proposed project. The property is an underutilized site situated in a high visibility area close to the Town center, transportation and other amenities. Redevelopment has long been a high priority for the Board and Town. Accordingly, the Town exercised its eminent domain authority to acquire the property and then issued proposals for its redevelopment.

"The Board has accepted the applicant's proposal and executed an LDA, which sets forth the terms for permitting and redevelopment. Two requirements of note in the LDA are the proposal includes 16 affordable units." An LDA is a Land Development Agreement.

The town bought the property for $5.27 million in 2021 and issued a Request for Proposals in June 2022, sold and entered into a LDA with Melanson in November 2022, which requires Melanson to deed-r land in perpetuity for affordable housing.

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The LDA is still an issue, however.

“I don’t think we have the latest LDA,” ZBA Chair Dorothy Simboli said.

Residents in the neighborhood want to see the long unused buildings gone.

“We have to have something there,” Spruce Street resident Ted Fitzgerald said. “The current situation depresses the area.”

Others agreed during public testimony.

“I’m in favor of a positive project,” Feigenbaum added after the meeting.

Neil Zolot has been a freelance journalist more than 40 years. He has worked for newspapers on the North Shore and in the Boston area.

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